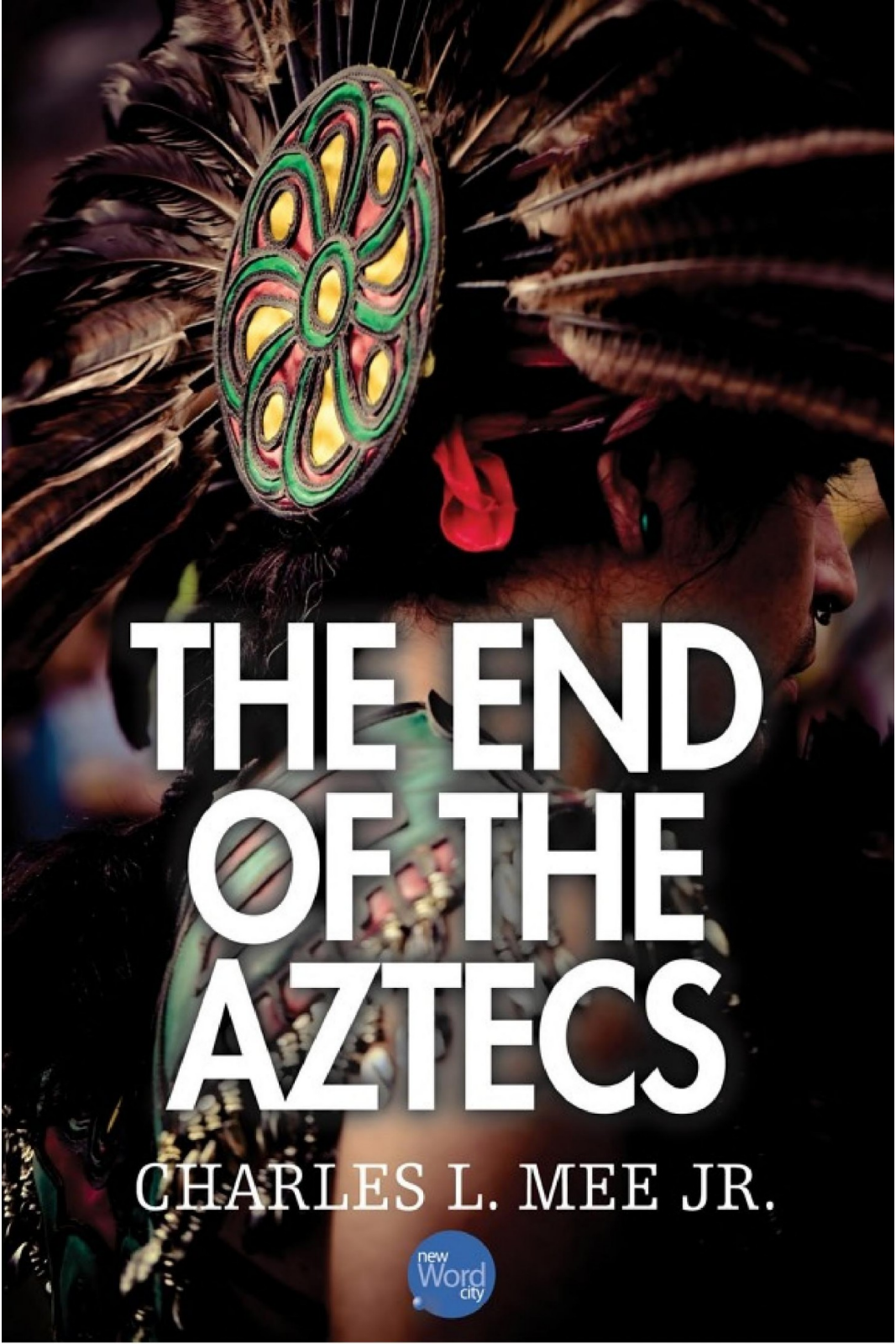




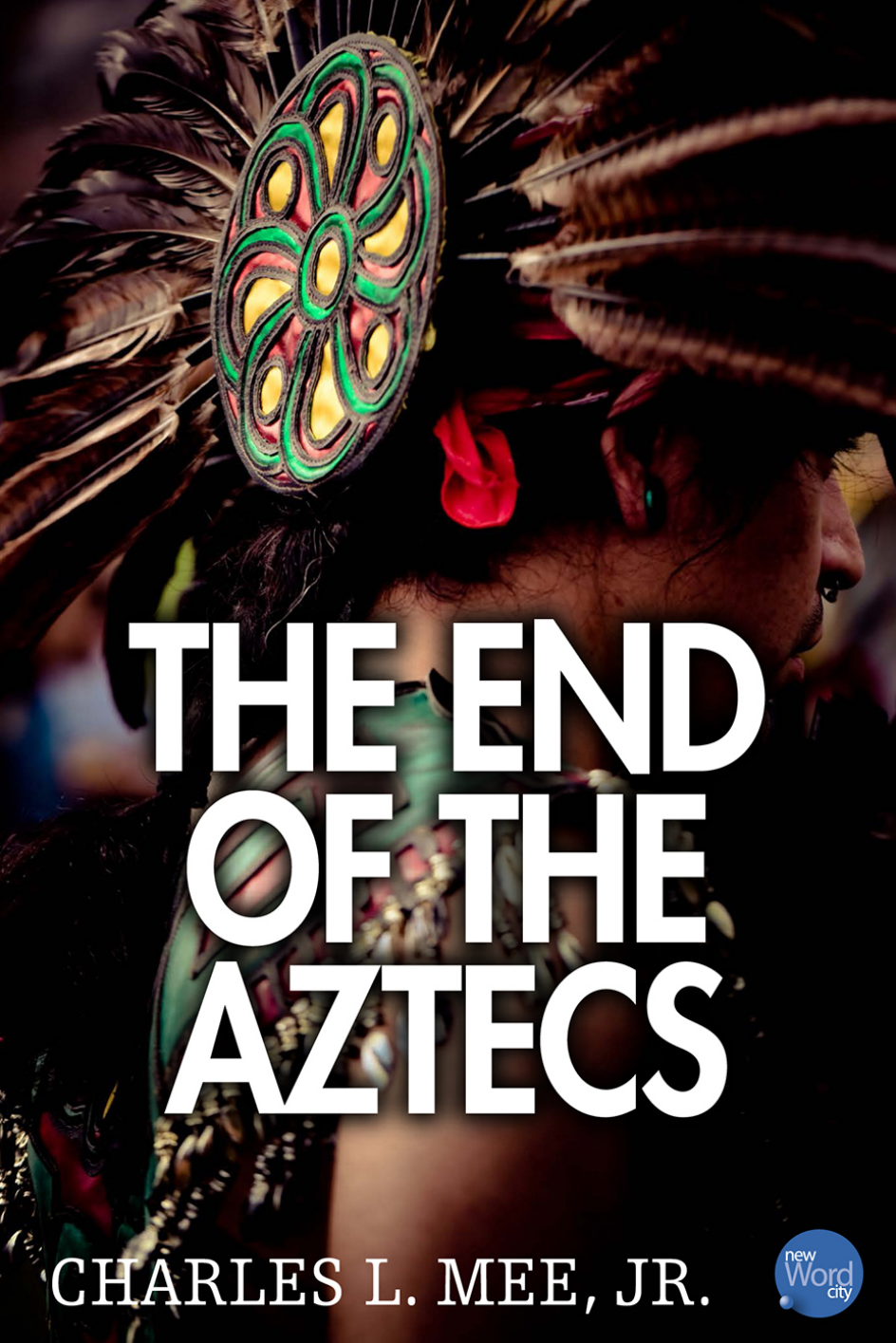
THE END OF THE AZTECS

CHARLES L. MEE JR.



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Because history is written in retrospect, and reveals to us in hindsight the incidents that brought some event to its apparently inevitable fruition, it prepares us badly for our own lives, in which there are not as many inevitabilities as there are surprises, accidents, operations of chance, and outright impossibilities that we never took into account when we made our plans and that alter our lives fundamentally and forever.

"I returned," reads Ecclesiastes 9:11, "and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift nor the battle to the strong, neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favor to men of skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all."

Which Western government was able to forecast to a degree of certainty in the middle 1980s - and plan its policies accordingly - that the [Soviet Union](#) would collapse by the end of the decade, freeing Eastern Europe from its grasp and dissolving the Soviet Empire in a matter of months? Who would have predicted that Premier [Mikhail Gorbachev](#) would be thrown out of office? Certainly not Gorbachev himself. Or that a previously little-known mayor of Moscow, [Boris Yeltsin](#), would put down a military coup - bloodlessly? Or that it would soon be rumored that the former apartment of [Joseph Stalin](#)'s chief executioner in the [House on the Embankment](#) was now occupied by the senior executive of the Russian branch of McDonald's.

Who could have predicted in 1972 that a night guard at the Watergate apartment complex in Washington, D.C., would discover a piece of tape holding open a lock on a door? Who could have imagined that piece of tape would lead to the discovery of men [breaking into the offices](#) of the Democratic National Committee at the Watergate, ending [Richard Nixon](#)'s political career and fueling a profound cynicism about politics in the United States for the next twenty years?

If the assassinations of [John](#) and [Robert Kennedy](#) were the results of plots of whatever scope, they were certainly, too, the result of extraordinary chance, and the starting point of much speculation about how the [Vietnam War](#) might have been ended differently had either of them lived, and how the history of the country would have changed as a result.

How could the Japanese have predicted that they had such a short time to negotiate an end to [World War II](#) before [Hiroshima and Nagasaki](#) would be obliterated? The agent of destruction was a weapon that could not form a part of their calculations because it came from an entirely new era.

Who could have imagined that an earthquake would have occurred in [Lisbon](#) in 1755, that would, according to some historians, help put an end to a predominant European attitude of optimism and replace it with a pervasive skepticism that marked the critical rationalism of the late eighteenth century?

For that matter, who could have dreamed that the [Black Death](#) would sweep across Europe beginning in the 1340s, reducing the populations of towns by halves and two-thirds, spreading profound grief and wrenching life changes? Who could have predicted that the bacillus in the belly of a flea would have the power to shatter the relationship between agricultural supply and demand across Europe, that the effects of the plague would destroy wage structures, freeing laborers to improve their working conditions, bestowing stowing excess wealth on some of the survivors so that they could indulge in a new trade in luxury goods and giving the final deathblow to the old feudal political structures that rested on the old financial arrangements? Who would have predicted beforehand that a flea would assist in the rise of new learning to try to understand the event that had occurred and help in some measure to bring about the beginning of the [Renaissance](#)?

And how utterly inconceivable it would have been in the sixteenth century to those European masters of the illusion of everlasting political stability, [Henry VIII](#) and [Francis I](#), that a kingdom as immense and powerful as that of France or England could be erased entirely from history by a small, unruly band of soldier-adventurers from an unknown and to them unheard-of continent. And yet, at the very time those two monarchs were meeting, this is what happened to the [Aztec](#) emperor [Montezuma II](#), another master of the illusions of political power on a different continent, who ruled an [empire](#) of apparently eternal stability.

That [Hernando Cortes](#) landed on the shore of Mexico in 1519 was a completely unpredictable surprise to the Aztecs and their leader Montezuma; and everything that followed from that moment to the destruction of an entire civilization was a succession of stunning, seemingly supernatural surprises to everyone involved, both Spaniards and Indians. History offers no more astonishing instance of the part that chance plays in our lives - how shallow is any plan that does not understand its own fragility - than this catastrophic slow-motion coming together of Cortes and Montezuma.

[Cortes and Montezuma at Tenochtitlan](#)

Even before anyone appeared, there were amazing events: A comet appeared and split into three; the waters of the lake boiled up in a rage; a sign like a tongue of fire burned up into the heavens.

These things began to happen ten years before the Spaniards landed in 1519: omens that foretold the Spaniards' arrival, according to the old men, who drew pictographs of these events some thirty years afterwards for the Franciscan missionary [Bernardino de Sahagun](#) - affirming, after the conquest and annihilation of the Aztec civilization, the everlasting power of the Aztecs. The Aztec civilization fell, the pictographs say, not because of the might of the Spanish invaders but because the end of the Aztecs was foreordained. The

Spaniards were mere pawns of Aztec cosmology.

The first ship came in the spring of 1519, sailing in along the northern shore of the Yucatan Peninsula, according to Sahagun's native informants, who offered a narrative that Sahagun wrote down. The lead ship was followed by eleven others (according to other sources, ten or twelve), carrying ten large bronze cannon, four falconets or light cannon, stores of powder and shot, sixteen horses, a handful of dogs, and about 550 soldiers, including thirty-two crossbowmen, and thirteen musketeers, and a hundred sailors, along with 200 Cuban natives to act as bearers and servants, several blacks, and a few Indian women.

The Spaniards, with their white skin, their suits of armor, weapons, cannon, dogs, and horses, were an arresting sight. "They were very white," Sahagun noted. "They had chalky faces." They presented a strange and amazing appearance to the Indians.

Such has been the theme of most historians for the past four centuries, including early indigenous accounts such as Sahagun's, who have described the Spanish ships as "of supernatural size and appearance," crossing "the heavenly water from the east," carrying "men of totally unknown breed" who rode on the backs of extraordinary deer-like beasts - or were perhaps centaurs themselves or gods.

But the natives of the Yucatan and Mexico could hardly have been so naive. The year before, the Indians had seen Spaniards cruise the same coastline in an expedition led by the adventurer [Juan de Grijalva](#). They had met the Spaniards and traded native gold ornaments and vessels and jewels for glass beads, scissors, pins, and other trinkets. And in 1517, [Francisco Hernandez de Cordoba](#) had sailed into the Gulf of Mexico looking for slaves.

In the spring of 1519, the Spaniards were led by Hernando Cortes. He did not look more godlike than the Spanish traders the Indians had seen before. But his dogs, horses, and weaponry lent an air of exotica they had not previously seen. In retrospect to Sahagun's informants, Cortes' appearance in Mexico, and what followed from it, were astonishing enough to earn the most extravagant reports.

Cortes was a soldier of fortune whose father and mother had destined him for the law - until he had quit school at the age of sixteen, which "vexed his parents exceedingly . . . He was a source of trouble to his parents as well as to himself, for he was restless, haughty, mischievous, and given to quarreling, for which reason he decided to seek his fortune." This account is the best that can be said of Cortes as a young man. It was written years later by his private secretary and chaplain, [Francisco Lopez de Gomara](#), no doubt relying greatly on what Cortes had told him. Cortes had set his sights on shaping a career in the

New World. He arrived at [Hispaniola](#) in 1504. Seven years later, he took part in the conquest of Cuba. There he was eventually chosen by [Diego Velasquez](#), the governor, to command an expedition to Mexico.

The men sailing with Cortes were mostly in their twenties and thirties. They had signed up for this voyage in the hope of getting rich. They received no salary for joining the expedition: They would be paid in spoils. They were marginal young men, their prospects at home not good enough to keep them there. They talked of converting the Indians to Christianity, and they meant what they said; they were devout Christians. But one did not fight for God and king without pay. They talked of trade, but if the Indians were unwilling to trade, armed robbery was not beneath them. They were a nervous, sometimes panicky band who might become uncommonly wealthy or be left for dead on an unknown continent.

Along the journey, dropping anchor from time to time to trade with the Indians, they picked up [Geronimo de Aguilar](#), who had been among those shipwrecked on a voyage in 1511 and had lived among the [Mayans](#) and learned their language. They also picked up a woman who had been sold into captivity to the Mayans, whom they called [Dona Marina](#). She spoke [Nahuatl](#), the language of the Aztecs, as well as [Maya](#). As the Spaniards moved into Aztec territory, Dona Marina translated from Nahuatl into Maya, and Aguilar translated from Maya into Spanish.

The fleet found safe harbor just before Easter at the island of San Juan de Ulua, as the Spaniards called it, set in a beautiful landscape of meadows and streams with broad sandy beaches. As they dropped anchor, two large canoes came out filled with Aztec ambassadors. The Indians brought some gifts, and they were taken aboard the flagship and given food and wine and some blue beads.

"They said that their lord," wrote the twenty-seven-year-old [Bernal Diaz](#), "a servant of the great Montezuma, had sent them to find out what kind of men we were and what we were seeking." According to Gomara, the Indians also inquired, with diplomatic tact, "whether they intended to stop or continue on beyond." Cortes responded that the Spaniards had come to speak to the lord of the Aztecs.

On the next day, Good Friday, the Spaniards went ashore on the mainland and set up a rude camp. On Easter Sunday, the local Aztec governor arrived. His name was Tenthli, and as Gomara wrote, he was accompanied by more than 4,000 men, unarmed and handsomely dressed, and loaded down with presents. Diaz noted that Tenthli had also brought along some Aztec artists. They made portraits of Cortes and his captains and soldiers, his ships and sails, and horses and guns - a detailed intelligence report to send back to Montezuma, the lord of the Aztecs. When Cortes asked to see Montezuma, saying that the Spaniards came as ambassadors from the greatest king on earth, Tenthli replied that word

would be sent to Montezuma, and they would see what he would do.

Cortes asked whether Montezuma had any gold. Tenthil responded that he did. Cortes asked, "Send me some of it because I and my companions suffer from a disease of the heart, which can be cured only with gold."

The emperor Montezuma, as Cortes would learn, ruled over a vast imperial domain from his capital city of [Tenochtitlan](#), the site of present-day Mexico City. The Aztec empire in central Mexico stretched from the Gulf coast, where the Spaniards had landed, to the Pacific Ocean (which had not yet been explored by the Spaniards), and south to present-day Guatemala. It was ruled by an oligarchy. The Aztec emperors were chosen by a group of about a hundred of the wealthiest and most powerful lords. Montezuma ruled by means of subtle, skillful, and constant maneuvering. At that time, Central Mexico had a population of perhaps 25 million, with 2 million or so in the region about Tenochtitlan. Of these, perhaps a total of 500,000 could be mustered as soldiers, though the offensive force comprised, on average, probably about 50,000 men. Just how the Spaniards might seem impressive enough to earn a meeting with a ruler of such power remained to be seen.

Montezuma's reply came back in just seven or eight days, accompanied by more gifts, and the word that the emperor "rejoiced to learn about" Cortes great king, and that Cortes should determine what he needed for himself and "the cure of his sickness," as well as whatever supplies he needed for his men and his ships. But as for a meeting, that would be "impossible."

Cortes gathered a sample of his own wealth to send to the emperor, asked again for a meeting, and inquired about the possibility of trade. As he awaited a reply, he got to know some of the local Indians, whom he found quite civilized and who identified themselves as being from the city of [Zempoala](#) - a city, they said, that had to maintain its independence from Montezuma "by force of arms."

This piece of unforeseeable luck electrified the Spaniard. As Diaz reported, Cortes had thus learned "that Montezuma had opponents and enemies, which greatly delighted him." Cortes would come to learn that Montezuma's great empire was fragmented and fragile. Mexico was composed of a loose collection of city-states, of hundreds of small villages, united and divided by more than twenty different languages and hundreds of different dialects. The empire was based upon the conquest and subjugation of many diverse peoples, and the conquered peoples were bitter and resentful. As Gomara put it, "Cortes was well pleased to find the lords of that country at war with each other, which would allow him the better to carry out his plans and intentions."

When Montezuma's reply came to Cortes the second time, it was brief. Cortes might have whatever he needed, but he must take his fleet and leave.

Cortes replied that it was not possible for the Spaniards to leave without seeing Montezuma. And with that the Spaniards retired to their temporary huts, the Indians retired to theirs. The following morning, the Indians' huts were empty. And Cortes called his captains together, according to Gomara, and "prepared for battle."

When at last the Spaniards set out for Tenochtitlan, the route they took was circuitous. They went first toward the north, to Zempoala, where they knew they would find people ready to join them in an uprising against Montezuma. Indeed, according to Gomara, the chief there told the Spaniard that "if Cortes so desired, he would make a league with all of [the neighboring provinces] that would be so strong that Montezuma would not be able to stand against it." From Zempoala, gathering allies as they went, the Spaniards moved on to [Quiahuiztlan](#), where they came across some of Montezuma's tax collectors and had them arrested. As soon as the chiefs of the neighboring towns of the [Totonac people](#) heard that the Spaniards had arrested Montezuma's tax collectors, they drew up a treaty of alliance with Cortes against Montezuma, bringing with them thousands of warriors. According to Gomara, "They finally decided to rebel and . . . they begged . . . Cortes to approve their decision and act as their captain and leader. . . . God knows how delighted Cortes was at this turn of events, for he thought by this means" of leading a revolution "to reach Mexico."

With their new allies, the Spaniards advanced into the territory of [Tlaxcala](#), where they were met by a force of several thousand warriors in several small skirmishes and two major battles. Both sides rushed forward, the Indians fighting with clubs, arrows, javelins, and fire-hardened darts; the Spaniards with artillery, muskets, crossbows, lances, and double-bladed swords. These were days of nearly continuous hand-to-hand fighting. Stones came "like hail" from the Indians' slings, and their "barbed and fire-hardened darts fell like corn on the threshing-floor," as Diaz wrote. The Spaniards fought them in a confused melee. At night a cold wind blew off the snowcapped mountains, and the Spaniards suffered from the chill.

Soon enough, they were suffering, too, from wounds (some had two or three wounds) and footsoreness, from rips and tears in clothes and boots, from a hailstorm, from the exhaustion of nonstop fighting, and from the paucity of oxygen in the atmosphere in the 7,000-foot-high mountains. The report of Diaz is a chronicle of human endurance beyond the limits of endurance; at the moment it seems he must finally conclude that here, at last, the Spaniards gave up and collapsed, Diaz only goes on to recount another and yet another extraordinary ordeal.

The Spaniards woke, fought to exhaustion, and dropped back to sleep, and, as Diaz said, after some days of this, "weary and wounded . . . ragged and sick . .

. [we] wondered what would happen to us when we had to fight Montezuma if we were reduced to such straits by the Tlaxcalans, whom our Zempoalan allies described as a peaceful people.”

How was it possible for this little band of Spaniards to march ever deeper into unknown territory, to decimate the vast armies brought against them, and, as Diaz recorded, lose only a relative handful of Spanish lives in such encounters?

Not too much faith should be placed in the numbers Diaz and the other Spaniards used to describe the size of the enemy. Though the Spanish accounts are filled with references to 30,000 or 150,000 warriors, it is clear that if these numbers are to be taken literally, nothing save a miracle would account for a Spanish survival. The numbers must have been grossly exaggerated.

Nor can much credit be given the Spanish crossbows. Although they outclassed Indian bows, as Norman Davies has written, they were not especially good weapons. And the Spanish pikes were not enormously impressive either. Neither can too much credit be given to the purely material effects of gunpowder. Spanish powder was often wet, and the guns were cumbersome over the mountains and difficult to bring effectively to bear on the enemy. The rate of fire of cannon and muskets could not compare with the rate of fire of the Indians' bows.

The psychological effect of gunpowder and horses and glistening armor, however, was incalculable. In some way, the Spaniards must have impressed the Indians in the way that unarmed demonstrators are impressed when heavily armed riot police wade into the midst of a crowd.

The weapons the Indians fought back with were hardly impressive. Indian bows were not often lethal, even when arrows rained on the Spaniards. It is significant that the Spaniards, when they complained about their wounds, complained more about the wounds received from stones than arrows. At close quarters, the Indians used wooden clubs tipped and ridged with sharpened obsidian, a vicious weapon when used against other Indians, but one that often shattered against Spanish helmets or was cut apart by the blow of a Spanish sword.

In close combat, the swords were effective. Pointed and double bladed, the Spaniards could stab and slash left and right. The obsidian club had to be hoisted above the head and brought down with force against an enemy to be most effective, but the Spanish sword worked well with fast, repeated slashes and jabs at waist level. Driving directly at the clusters of Indian warriors surrounding their chief, the Spaniards would often capture or kill the local chiefs. Once their leader was in chains or dead, the warriors often retired from battle. This fierce superiority of the sword gave the Spaniards their real material advantage.

But even more than these differences in weapons, the difference in the rules of warfare by which each side fought determined the outcome of the battles: The Spaniards fought to kill; the Indians, in accord with their custom, fought only to capture.

Finally, the Spaniards had their Totonac allies with them - and as they penetrated farther and farther into Mexico, to their good fortune they recruited more and more allies. When they at last reached Montezuma's capital city, the odds would be more favorable to Cortes' army.

Eventually, in any case, the Tlaxcalans surrendered - and agreed to join Cortes against the Aztecs. Meanwhile, in his capital city, Montezuma did nothing.

How is it that Montezuma could have been so resigned? Sahagun's informants offer an explanation that has endured ever since: Montezuma and the Aztecs thought that Cortes was the ancient king-god [Quetzalcoatl](#), the Feathered Serpent, who, the legend goes, had been driven from his kingdom and had vowed to one day return to reclaim his rule over their empire. Some historians have claimed that Montezuma was, therefore, the prisoner of his own mythology. The myth is a wonderful explanation, but it will not do. By the time the Spaniards had reached Tenochtitlan, the Aztecs no longer believed the invaders to be divine.

Aficionados of diplomacy prefer the explanation that Montezuma waited for Cortes to arrive at Tenochtitlan because it was the Aztec custom that an ambassador was immune from harm. Still others claim that Montezuma's strategy of lavish gift giving and of permitting Cortes' entry into Tenochtitlan was aimed at impressing the Spaniards with Aztec superiority or dominance.

Or it may be that, as the Spaniards brought off one military and diplomatic victory after another, Montezuma came to understand to his surprise that this insignificant stranger was being transformed into an unprecedented and puzzling threat that needed to be handled with great care. This appears to have been Cortes' view. As Gomara explained: Montezuma "did not wish to stir up trouble for himself (and this was the truest reason)" by appearing to resist Cortes and so encouraging other provinces to join him in an uprising that would develop into a revolution. He would pursue the strategy of the spider and the fly; he would bring Cortes into Tenochtitlan and hold him hostage, as, in fact, he ordinarily held as many as 600 Aztec chieftains in permanent hostage.

As the Spaniards advanced, they laid waste to the town of [Cholula](#). As they approached closer and closer to the capital city, their reputation for savagery and invincibility was widespread, and their march, as they drew in allies along the way, came unexpectedly to resemble a triumphal procession.

When the Spaniards reached the city of [Cuiclahuac](#), they entered the lake

country in the Valley of Mexico, where the towns were sometimes half in the water and half on land or sometimes built entirely in the water and connected to the land by broad causeways. They entered the world of the "floating garden people," whose towns and buildings, "all made of stone," said Diaz, "seemed like an enchanted vision. . . . Indeed, some of our soldiers asked whether it was not all a dream."

On November 8, 1519, past Iztapalapa (now part of Mexico City), they set foot on a broad causeway - wide enough, said Cortes, so that eight horsemen could ride abreast. And partway along the causeway, the Spaniards came to a large stone bastion with towers and a gateway, where they were met by 4,000 "gentlemen of the court" of Tenochtitlan, according to Gomara, "richly dressed after their fashion, all in the same style." As a sign of peace, each one in turn touched the ground with his right hand and kissed it and bowed.

Then, just across a little bridge, the Spaniards saw Montezuma. "He walked," said Gomara, "under a gallium of gold and green feathers, strung about with silver hangings and carried by four gentlemen." He was supported on the arms of two royal princes, the great princes [Cuitlahuac](#) and [Cacama](#). "All three were dressed alike, save that Montezuma wore golden shoes set with precious stones."

Servants walked ahead of Montezuma, laying mantles down on the ground so that he would not touch the earth. Then came 200 lords, all barefoot. They wore exceptionally rich cloaks and carried gourd vases of popcorn flowers, yellow tobacco flowers, and cacao blossoms. Montezuma walked in the middle of the causeway, and all the rest followed him, "hugging the walls, their eyes downcast."

Cortes dismounted and stepped forward to embrace the emperor, but the two princes put out their hands at once to keep Cortes from touching Montezuma. Montezuma spoke a few words of welcome, and Cortes replied with wishes for the emperor's good health. At that, Cortes was permitted to step forward and put a necklace of pearls and diamonds around the neck of Montezuma.

The emperor ordered one of his nephews to take Cortes by the hand. Montezuma turned and walked back up the causeway, while his followers turned their faces to the walls, and his nephews brought Cortes and the Spaniards and several thousand of their Indian allies along behind.

They came almost immediately to a large and beautiful palace that had once belonged to Montezuma's father, and there Montezuma himself took Cortes by the hand and led him into the palace, "and bade me," as Cortes said, to "sit on a very rich throne . . . and then left saying that I should wait for him."

The Spaniards and several thousand of their native warriors were ensconced in

the very center of the Aztec capital, surrounded by the Aztecs. The Aztecs, however, were surrounded by more of Cortes' allies outside the city. Frozen in this balance of forces, Cortes and Montezuma commenced a singular dialogue whose end was entirely unpredictable.

After the Spaniards had eaten, Montezuma returned and beckoned his aides to bring in presents. Montezuma was about forty years old, said Diaz, "of good height, well proportioned, spare and slight." He bathed every afternoon, said Diaz - twice a day, said Gomara. The Spaniards, still sleeping in their armor, were impressed by the frequency of Montezuma's bathing. Montezuma and Cortes exchanged brief, polite speeches, and Montezuma took his leave once more.

For the next six days, the Spaniards were left alone. The city in which they found themselves would have impressed anyone, and it must have seemed glamorous to this lot of rough soldiers, most of whom had never seen any large city, except perhaps for a few days they might have spent in a Spanish port before their departure to the New World.

Tenochtitlan lay in the middle of a vast bowl formed by high hills. At the bottom of the bowl were a large plain and many shallow lakes. Tenochtitlan had been built up atop a bit of rocky ground and a network of sandbanks and mud banks and marshes in the very midst of a large saltwater lake, until, like Venice, it was a marvel of human artifice, laced with canals, connected by bridges and little causeways. Four long, wide causeways connected it to the mainland. An aqueduct brought fresh water into the center of the city from a mountain spring.

Near the middle of this complex of little manmade islands, Cortes remarked, was a marketplace "twice as big as that of [Salamanca](#), with arcades all around, where more than 60,000 people come each day to buy and sell," where one could find chickens, partridges, quail, wild ducks, turtledoves, pigeons, parrots, eagles, sparrow hawks, falcons - some of these birds used for food, some for feathers, some for hunting. Or one could get gold or feather-work in the forms of butterflies, trees, flowers, herbs, or rocks. Or one could get a silver fish with silver scales, a silver monkey that moved its feet and head, a parrot that moved its wings and head and tongue, carved turquoise and emeralds, stuff made of conches, periwinkles, bones, sponges, pebbles, toys for children, herbs and roots, leaves and seeds, ointments, syrups and waters, culinary delicacies such as snakes without head or tail, little bark-less dogs that had been castrated and fattened, moles, mice, worms, and lice. One could get beans, leeks, onions, garlic, artichokes, sorrel, borage, or watercress. One could even get a sort of scum that was skimmed from the ooze that could be found atop the lake at certain times during the year and that was spread out on the floor, dried, made into cakes, and eaten like cheese: "delicious," Gomara remarked.

All around the city, said Cortes, there were many temples, "beautiful buildings," and among them all, the principal one "whose great size and magnificence no human tongue could describe." The main temple occupied a site seventy by eighty yards at its base, with two staircases leading up nearly 200 feet to a terrace and twin shrines. There the stones were splattered black with the blood of human sacrifices.

Most often, the victim would be led to the top of the temple steps and stretched out over a block of stone by five priests. And a priest would cut him open with an obsidian-bladed knife, reach in, and pluck out his heart while it was still beating. The heart would be offered up to the sun, to keep it moving in its course. The body was often then thrown down the temple steps and flayed and cut up. Its skull went to a great skull rack (where, according to Gomara, there were 136,000 skulls, in rows, teeth outward), and the remainder was distributed among the warriors who had captured the victim and ceremonially consumed by the victors.

In the days following, Cortes and Montezuma met from time to time. In all of Spain, said Cortes, there was "nothing to compare" with Montezuma's palace, with its hundred rooms and hundred baths with walls of marble, jasper, alabaster, and porphyry (black stone shot with veins of ruby red), and ceilings of cedar, palm, and cypress, set amidst gardens of medicinal and aromatic herbs, flowers, and sweet-smelling trees with walkways and ponds and baths and summerhouses and fountains and bowers of small songbirds, parrots, and quetzal birds. Cortes mentioned his wish to convert Montezuma to Christianity, and this topic of conversation must have struck Montezuma as outrageous and irrelevant to the negotiations about trade, if negotiations were what they were conducting.

The Spaniards evidently became increasingly aware, too, of the absurdity and perilousness of their position. Cortes had come to feel "beset with misgivings" - and to have a dreadful sense that they were caught in a web. It had begun to dawn on the Spaniards that there was no reason for Montezuma to allow them to leave Tenochtitlan alive. The Spaniards were as much surrounded as the Aztecs were and came to see no way out of this dilemma except, extraordinarily, to kidnap Montezuma and hold him hostage in their palace.

Cortes took thirty armed men with him to pay a call on Montezuma, Cortes greeting the emperor, according to Diaz, "as usual, and then began to jest and banter with him, as he had done before." But soon he moved to the point. The emperor would need to come and stay with the Spaniards.

Montezuma was "profoundly shaken," said Gomara. "My person is not such as can be taken prisoner, and even if I should consent to it, my people would not suffer it."

According to Diaz, Cortes and Montezuma spent half an hour "discussing" the question. As the "discussion" went on, some of Cortes soldiers grew jittery. "What is the use of all these words?" one of the Spaniards burst out. "Either we take him or we knife him. If we do not look after ourselves now we shall be dead men."

In the end - perhaps calculating that resistance would not only cause his own death but that of many others and the destruction of his city - Montezuma did not resist.

As the Spaniards kept Montezuma captive, sometimes in manacles, they maintained the myth of his rule. Each day they would ask Montezuma what his orders were, and each day those orders would be relayed to the city. Sometimes Cortes and Montezuma would sit together and play a game called Totoloque, as Diaz said, "with small, very smooth gold pellets specially made for [the game].

They would throw these pellets a considerable distance, and some little slabs as well which were also of gold, and in five throws they either gained or lost certain pieces of gold or rich jewels that they had staked."

Nonetheless, for all the courtesy between Montezuma and the Spaniards, the Spaniards slept in their armor and kept their horses saddled and bridled.

Eventually, perhaps understanding that he had lost this curious game and must now purchase his freedom and that of his city, Montezuma opened up his personal treasure and gave it to Cortes and bid his chiefs to bring gifts, too: all the gold and silver Montezuma possessed, along with garments of cotton and magnificent feather-work, golden nose crescents, golden discs and necklaces, blowguns inlaid with wood and silver, jewels and precious stones and pearls, silver plates and cups, pitchers and saucers: more than the Spaniards could ever have desired - so much treasure from Montezuma's gifts alone that it took the Spaniards three days just to examine it all and remove all the little embellishments from the hunks of solid gold that were of most interest to the conquerors.

Just at this moment, in May 1520, Montezuma's messengers brought the startling news that another Spanish fleet had been sighted at the very place where Cortes and his men had landed. A picture painted on cloth had been brought to the emperor. There were eighteen ships, eighty horses, 900 soldiers. This force was led by a captain named [Panfilo de Narvaez](#), who had been sent by Diego Velasquez to stop Cortes from operating in defiance of his commission.

Cortes greeted the news of the Spanish fleet with a show of relief and even joy. However, out of Montezuma's presence, Cortes grew thoughtful, suspecting

Narvaez's true mission, and presenting a situation the Aztecs would take advantage of. Messages to and from Panfilo de Narvaez confirmed his suspicions, and so Cortes left at once for the coast, taking about 120 of his best soldiers with him and leaving about eighty at Tenochtitlan, under the command of Pedro de Alvarado, who had a reputation for both bravery and cruelty.

After several days' march, Cortes located Narvaez's army at Zempoala and took them by surprise at night, so quickly that only one cannon was fired against Cortes troops. Narvaez himself took a pike thrust, which cost him an eye, and was dragged down the steps and taken off and put into irons. Thus Cortes augmented his forces with a sizable and fresh lot of soldiers, including, as Gomara remarked, "a Negro man sick with the smallpox" - who would, in fact, turn out to be a very significant figure.

In Tenochtitlan, the whole city had exploded in violence. The Indians had been celebrating the annual festival of [Toxcatl](#) in the sacred temple courtyard. Hundreds had come, with drums, conchs, trumpets, bone fifes and other instruments. Covered with necklaces and jewels, feathers and pearls, they danced in rings, accompanied by singers.

Then, in the midst of the dancing - for some reason, from sudden fear that the Indians meant harm, or else from a predetermined plan - the Spaniards abruptly closed off all the exits from the temple courtyard and, with swords drawn, waded into the midst of the dancers.

"They attacked the man who was drumming," according to Sahagun's native informants, "and cut off his arms. Then they cut off his head, and it rolled across the ground. They attacked all the celebrants, stabbing them, spearing them . . . some of them from behind, and these fell instantly to the ground with their entrails hanging out. Others they beheaded . . . or split their heads to pieces. . . . Some attempted to run away, but . . . they seemed to tangle their feet in their own entrails . . . they could find no escape."

The next day, those Aztecs who had not been trapped in the temple courtyard attacked the Spaniards with javelins and arrows. The initial fighting saw several Spaniards killed and many on both sides wounded. The Aztecs closed off the causeways, tore up the exits of the bridges over which the Spaniards might have escaped, and threw up barricades and roadblocks across the streets.

Cortes, hearing the news of the Aztec uprising, set out at once to return to Tenochtitlan, but as he passed back through the countryside discovered "all the land was in revolt and almost uninhabited." And when he reentered the city of Tenochtitlan, at midday in late June 1520, he found the streets and squares almost entirely deserted and some broken bridges and barricades. "All the houses were empty," said Diaz. And there was quiet as the Aztecs let the Spaniards back into the trap.

The roads around Tenochtitlan were filled with warriors, enemies of the Spaniards. The thousands of Cortes' "faithful" native allies now disappeared entirely from the accounts, all except the few thousand Tlaxcalans trapped inside the city with the Spanish troops. The revolution had evaporated. Those who now surrounded Tenochtitlan were supporters of Montezuma or of other rival chiefs.

Such "a multitude" of Aztec warriors now rushed to surround the Spaniards' quarters, said Cortes, "that neither the streets nor the roofs of the houses could be seen for them." And soon so many stones were "hurled at us from their slings into the fortress that it seemed they were raining from the sky, and the arrows and spears were so many that all the walls and courtyards were so full we could hardly move for them."

At the end, the Spanish force was overwhelmed by superior numbers. Still, the Aztecs repeatedly tried to scale the walls of the palace, reluctantly running headlong into Spanish cannon and swords. At last they shot burning arrows into the fortress, hoping to burn the Spaniards out.

Cortes summoned Montezuma and asked him to go up to the roof of the palace and tell his people to stop the fighting. Montezuma mounted to the roof, and a great silence fell over the thousands who swarmed over the streets and nearby rooftops. The emperor begged his people to put down their arms and let the Spaniards go. But a few of the Aztec chiefs replied to Montezuma "in tears," as Diaz said, that they no longer recognized him as their leader, and they would not stop now until all the Spaniards were dead, "and they begged for his forgiveness."

And then, said Diaz, the Aztec warriors began to throw rocks at Montezuma. The Spanish soldiers rushed the emperor back inside the palace, where they discovered he had been wounded. He refused to have his wounds tended or to eat anything, and he soon died. Other sources, including some native ones, indicate that Montezuma was not struck but that he was murdered by the Spaniards back in their palace quarters. Some of the native sources say that not only Montezuma but other lords kept as hostages by the Spaniards in their palace were murdered. One, it is said, fought so hard at the end that he had to be stabbed forty-seven times to kill him. Which of all these stories is true, we cannot know. But it would not seem to have been in the interests of the Spaniards to kill Montezuma at that moment.

In the middle of the night, the Spaniards brought the gold and jewels and silver out into the middle of a hall in the palace. Those who wanted some took it and stuffed it into their packs and clothes. Narvaez's men and "some of our people" took most, Diaz thought. In the dark, a night of mist and drizzle, they made a run for it.

The horsemen went out first to charge and scatter any Aztecs who might block the way. The horsemen were followed by soldiers carrying a large makeshift wooden bridge to be thrown down over water where the Aztecs had removed the usual bridges along the causeway. Another group lugged the heavy cannon. Musketeers and crossbowmen and swordsmen followed in increasingly panicky disarray. They managed to slam the bridge down across the first break they came to. They had caught the Aztecs by surprise, so a good many Spaniards managed to slip past the main mass of Indians in their headlong dash down the causeway. Then the Aztecs came awake with the cries and whistles, and the Spaniards broke in a stampede out onto the causeway. A mass of canoes closed on them from the lake on either side, while Aztec warriors threw stones and spears from the rooftops. The soldiers left the bridge behind at that first crossing, and as their horses slipped and fell into the lake, they plunged on ahead, crossing over the next water gap by stepping on the cannon and bundles and boxes that had fallen in along with the dead troops, servants, and horses. As they rushed from water gap to water gap, just ahead of the warriors behind them, chancing the improvised gauntlet of warrior-filled canoes on either side, those who had stuffed much gold into their clothes were among the first to sink into the water gaps, and become stepping-stones for their fleeing comrades. "So those who died," said Diaz, "died rich," though they had not been rich for long.

The remnants of the Spaniards had reached the mainland by dawn. According to Diaz, there had been 1,300 Spanish soldiers in Tenochtitlan in those last days as well as 2,000 native, mostly Tlaxcalan warriors. In the siege and flight, more than 850 Spaniards and 1,000 allies were killed. (Others put the figures at 450 Spaniards and more than 4,000 Indian allies.)

The remaining Spaniards fled all the way to the city of Tlaxcala, where their strongest allies gave them refuge. For the Tlaxcalans, however, there was no quitting the civil war that they had begun with Cortes. And so, with their urging and support, the Spanish troops pulled themselves together.

Since he would have to attack the city from both the causeways and the surrounding water, Cortes had thirteen brigantines that could operate in the shallow lake waters constructed. In late December 1520, Cortes and his men, along with thousands of Indian warriors, crossed the mountains and reentered the valley. Securing the shores of the lake, they cut the city off from the support of the countryside. Then they destroyed the great aqueduct that brought the main supply of fresh water to the city.

Finally, in late April 1521, the siege began. Ordering his brigantines across the water and his foot soldiers down the causeways, Cortes attacked the capital. The Aztecs had prepared their defenses by planting sharpened stakes just under the water at the gaps in the causeway. The Spanish lost both men and

horses on the stakes, and in short order the water gaps were flush with stones, spears, and dead horses and men. A group of Spaniards were caught out ahead of their companions and the Indians took them prisoner, beheaded some, and bowled their heads along the causeways toward their mates.

After several weeks of stalemate, Cortes instructed his men to remove every barricade more slowly and deliberately and destroy every Aztec wall, to demolish every Aztec tower and house along the way. As they advanced, they filled in the gaps of the causeway with rubble, leaving the landscape level behind them.

The slow destruction of Tenochtitlan went on for eighty days, and toward the end the stench of the bodies rotting in the water was overwhelming. As the city began its final collapse, old men, women, and children flooded out toward the causeways in such panic, said Gomara, "that they pushed each other into the water, where many drowned."

The end came on August 13, 1521. The few Aztec warriors still alive gathered on the rooftops of the few houses that still stood and "stared at the ruins of their city in a dazed silence . . . the women and children and old men . . . all weeping." The conquerors walked down the streets of the city, white handkerchiefs over their noses. They could see stagnant water that had served as the drinking water in the last days and what had served for food: lizards and salt grasses from the lake, corncoobs, water lilies, twigs, pieces of leather, weeds, and dirt. And everywhere piles of dead bodies. They had died mostly of starvation and smallpox - the virus that had been brought ashore by the man in Panfilo de Narvaez's crew which had made its way across Mexico with Cortes and had even run ahead of his army, decimating the population even before the Spaniards arrived.

The pestilence did not end with the death of Tenochtitlan; the smallpox - along with outbreaks of influenza, measles, and typhus - spread throughout the countryside, subsided and recurred, subsided and recurred, until by 1600, of a total population of perhaps 25 million, an estimated 18 to 22 million were dead.

In some regions of Mexico, the mortality rate was so great that the living could not bury the dead. According to Fray [Toribio de Benavente](#), the Indians, overwhelmed by the task, simply "pulled down the houses" on top of the dead, "so that their homes became their tombs."

A civilization died, not simply a city or a government or an empire, but the accumulated knowledge of life and art and skill. Here and there, fragments of the civilization would persist with remarkable hardiness, but the civilization as a whole was gone. And all that would remain of it were its artifacts and its story of a succession of stunning and devastating surprises that brought about its end, the surprise to Montezuma that Cortes should have arrived at all in the

Aztec empire, the surprise to Cortes that he would step into a land where so many wanted to rise in revolt against the central government, the fact amazing to both Cortes and Montezuma that the Spaniards could overcome the enormous military odds against them, that Cortes could take Montezuma captive in his own capital, that the Spaniards could level the entire city of Tenochtitlan, that illness could annihilate tens of millions of people, that the backbone of an entire civilization could be broken in a matter of only a few decades. It is a humbling story to anyone who neglects to take into account the inevitability of the unpredictable in human affairs, of what the Romans called Fortuna.



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